

CRUMBS FOR THE COURT JESTER:
FOLKLORE IN ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS

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The study of themes and myths in literature necessitates consultation of ethnology and folklore.

--PMLA, 1952

There are other disciplines which started in the English department and are now moving toward autonomy. Folklore is one.

--The College Teaching of English
NCTE Curriculum Series,
1965.

Every self-respecting English department chairman needs to have his own tame resident folklorist--someone to try the latest jokes on ("Has Arnie Thompson motified this one?"), or to use for that necessary "consultation" on theme and myth ("Do you know any good book on flying saucers?"), and especially to sic the local ladies' club on whenever they need a luncheon speaker ("Preferably one who does interpretive readings--and not over 45 minutes!"). Thus it is, for better or for worse, that the largest percentage of trained folklore scholars owe their academic home to the largesse of some reigning monarch in a department of English. Usually these territories are populated thickly by people who are very big on Victorian prose styles (D--n!), Shakespearean textual cruxes ('sblood!), or Beowulfian prosody (Hwæt!). In a crowd like that, one doesn't make many jokes about the articles in PMLA; someone just might dig up your piece on shaggy dog stories from JAF, or spot the reprint of Dundes' latrinalia essay in The Realist (s--t!).

Some folklorists--perhaps feeling damned forever by that minor or M.A. in English--seem to be crying on the inside most of the time, while they laugh on the outside over the steady series of comp. and introdlit. courses they must teach to keep the kids from starving and the curriculum committee from dropping the annual ballad course. A few folklorists have made it up and out, like Dundes and Georges going from Kansas to Cal; Halpert and Beuhler up in St. John's, Newfoundland, even have "Department of Folklore" on their letterhead, but, for all I know, maybe have only codfish in their lunch buckets. The rest of us must be realistic, saying as Archey used to on Duffy's Tavern, "Leave us face it." The Universities of California, Pennsylvania, and Indiana cannot hire all of us. And the Veterinary College of Arizona or East Virginia State Normal School will not be establishing Folklore departments for a long, long time; neither, for that matter, will the University of Utah and a thousand other big, growing, and respectable colleges and universities. What most folklorists must do is come to terms with their role as court jester, play it to the hilt, quietly make themselves indispensable, inconspicuously enlarge their domain bit by bit, and, in the

meantime, privately fatten on the dialogue with kindred spirits which is available through correspondence, reading, attending meetings, and occasionally bringing a student or colleague to the point where you can discuss jump-rope rhymes or rail fences with him and leave the office door open.

I believe that I can define my own stance as a contented captive folklorist in three different English departments, so far, in terms of three principles--and the triplication may be significant--(1) I have had much better choice this way of the regions I live in, because English is professed everywhere and folklore isn't; (2) I have discovered that I can teach any English course partly as a folklore course anyway; and (3) I have learned to do the tasks "suited to the limitations of the area." The quotation marks in number three surround a phrase from a letter Archer Taylor wrote me when I was a graduate student at IU nearing the end and planning to get as far from the humid flatlands as possible. He offered this sage comment in the same letter: "There is a certain advantage in going to a place where your merits would be visible from afar: 'There's a good man in Alaska,' they might say. With the same amount of effort one would not easily make a mark in Ottumwa, Iowa, or some such place."

I haven't made it to Alaska yet, but I have begun to make a mark in folklore in a modest way, and I have come to the point where I think I see more clearly than when I was starting out what the role of a folklorist in an English department might be.

My first job decision was prophetic: I discouraged interviewers from schools where there seemed some likely chance for "programs" to develop in folklore because they all were located South or East of Bloomington. I accepted a position in the Northwest--at the University of Idaho--where the nearby skiing and trout fishing were fringe benefits, where folklore studies had been minimal, and where the chairman took it for granted that a degree in folklore qualified me to teach it, as well as another new course in Literature of the American West. Enter principles numbers two and three: I read westerns like mad all summer, and eventually I published five articles that grew out of preparations of western folklore-literature units for that course. I also began to publish research on Idaho lore based on leads my students could bring me (superstitions from freshman comp. essays, and a local squawman's tall tales from folklore classes) and I encouraged my best and most interested students to publish their own work (see the Idaho Issue of WF, 1965).

Without reviewing my entire career, which wouldn't take very long anyway, I might say that the payoff so far has taken two forms. First, I have had the gratifying experience several times of being offered interviews and jobs as a folklorist, solely because of my FOLKLORE credentials, rather than as a workhorse lit/comp teacher who also doubles in "folk-lore" (or "forklore," as one dean's office spelled it). Second, I have brought out what I think is a pretty good textbook, The Study of American Folklore, which grew from a welter of lecture notes originally used to teach the subject to students who mostly took my course because they thought it was an easy three hours in English or because they had it confused with children's literature or square dance.

If I confess now that I have acquired a missionary spirit about folklore in English departments, I hope it will not be taken to suggest that my mind has been swayed by my residence in Zion. Nor should anyone assume

that I'm secretly "building an empire" in Utah, soon to be announced in lavish brochures outlining a newer bigger better degree-archival-publication structure with vast Bloomingtonian arabesques and flourishes. One graduate student in English here did actually put a minor in folklore together recently by taking all five of the courses I offer from time to time, but that was his idea, not mine. I had tried to get him to transfer to Indiana for a Ph.D. My mission is not primarily to win converts to folklore specialization, nor to get myself involved in the kind of administrative burdens that go with building a program to serve or produce the specialists. "Bagwise," I say to myself, "that is not mine." My dedication, instead, is to subvert the existing structure of my department just enough to squeeze in the courses I want to teach and the research I want to do, and further to turn out (and maybe turn-on) students who will do the same kind of underground work in their own major fields and in their careers. When someone now and then finds his career to be inclining towards folklore, I'm always ready with the pitch for Pennsylvania, the kudos for Cooperstown, or whatever.

A folklorist in an English department can learn a great deal about his students and colleagues by looking at what their professional publications have to say about the field of folklore. This soon makes it apparent that what these people know about folklore is likely to be erroneous or, at best, limited; but the able folkman can turn all of this to his advantage. I illustrate just a few key techniques, drawing from my funny file of "faint praise" and "howler" quotations culled from various sources.

Let us approach English studies from the top down. Most advanced-degree holders in English sometime during their preparation will have been exposed to the semi-official MLA statement The Aims, Methods, and Materials of Research in the Modern Languages and Literatures (1952) which is revised from time to time and distributed widely in pamphlet form. It is chastening to a court jester to learn where the royalty places his services. My first epigraph above represents exactly one-half of the attention granted to folklore (under "Literary History--Auxiliary Disciplines"). The other reference comes under "Linguistic Geography" where it is suggested that regionalism in language is a "convenient index for regionalism in other cultural features, such as folklore." Meagre, huh? (But remember how well it worked for Dorson in the "relic areas" mapped by linguists in Maine?) The lesson here is that the opening wedge for your specialized courses should be driven in at the softest spots of the discipline's curriculum, that is as aids to studying literary history or linguistics--and these are areas that nobody can afford to be against.

In a later (1963) revision of the MLA pamphlet, folklore by implication has gained higher status and greater range. Not only is the treatment under linguistics ("Dialect Geography") longer and more specific, but the whole concept of traditional sources and backgrounds of literature is given fuller treatment in the essay by Robert E. Spiller ("Literary History"). We must, then, forgive him his sole reference to a source book--The Golden Bough--and his romantic notion that "...the pace of life of farm and forest produces the poetry of nature and the simple life and the romance of the long ago to help warm the long evenings by the log fire." When we get our American Folklore course established by appealing to such assumptions, we can bring in the protest song and story, urban belief tale, blues, graffiti, etc. later. Our best spokesman in the 1963 pamphlet is Northrop Frye, whose case for studying traditional materials (under

"Literary Criticism") is so philosophically well-developed and so elegantly phrased that it attracts us (and our chairman) at once to his other articles and books and to their argument for getting back to the roots of literature. With Frye in hand (and never mind for the moment how he oversimplifies the materials and meanings of folklore) the folkman is ready even to dare to suggest a course in "Archetypal Criticism"--if the chairman doesn't ask him for it first. The latest MLA statement to come out is a supplement to the old pamphlet called Relations of Literary Study: Essays on Interdisciplinary Contributions (1967); by now the folkman is ready to mine its riches on his own, noting especially the essays on myth (Frye again), sociology (Leo Lowenthal) and music (Bertrand Bronson).

While exploiting his creeping respectability in English studies, the folklore teacher must be ever alert for the menacing attack from the flank and rear by the common notion that the place in the curriculum for such stuff is high school, or even elementary school. Among your immediate colleagues in English this is seldom difficult to dispute, so low is their opinion of sub-collegiate teaching and teachers. But your students from the school of education who flock into folklore courses, especially in the summer, will have their own ideas about it, and so will the Education faculty.

The MLA, never at a loss for original ideas, gave its blessing in 1961 to an "Articulated English Program" in Issues, Problems and Approaches in the Teaching of English. And where does folklore fit? You guessed it--grades 1-6 as "The web of literary reference;" therefore, it follows that "Every elementary school teacher should have a minor in English with special courses in children's literature which include readings in the fields of myth, folk and fairy lore, and national legends." Various writers in the National Council of Teachers of English report quoted in epigraph number 2 above also view folklore as a teacher-preparation subject. In the chapter on "General and Interdisciplinary Courses," for instance, there are references to "poetry courses of folk literature" and to "other courses which utilize prose materials of the 'tall story' variety, including Pecos Bill yarns, Paul Bunyan legends and others." Even closer to their own turf the literary scholars may be shaky about folklore facts; on page 15 of the same NCTE publications it is revealed that "In 1857-1858 Francis Child published his monumental Scottish and English Ballads." (Note: the author of that blooper is a Yale professor.) So be it: folklore for the school teachers of tomorrow. It is up to those of us who teach it to them to assure that they know folklore from fakelore by the time they graduate, even if it be fakelore that brings many of them to us in the first place.

The public school teachers need---and want---all the help they can get wit' folklore. The English teaching majors and minors in particular are expected to trot out the appropriate folk heroes or customary decorations at the drop of a holiday, and they get as sick of cut-out-paper pumpkins, pilgrims, and Paul Bunyans in the name of national folklore as we do. They are perfectly capable themselves of seeing through the inanities of curricular guides that prate on and on about charming folk-glop that no folk ever spoke. An instructive assignment, after a couple of weeks in the introductory folklore course, is to have students critique a standard school encyclopedia piece on American folklore. To add insult to injury, you can usually get offprints of these articles to distribute in class. My own favorite horrible examples come from the 1961 edition of

Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia where it is suggested, among other things, that "folklore" is a folk term, that similar folktales go back to a period when all people spoke a common language, that Negro folktales "have none of the sorrow that characterizes their religious songs," and that folk painters in Colonial times did the bodies of portraits in the winter and added the heads of their customers in the summer.

Useful in the same way are teaching aids issued by our old friend NCTE. In The Teacher and American Literature (1965), for example, the chapter on elementary school English hits this high note on its opening page: "Tales of Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill grew bit by bit from yarns spun around the campfires of lumberjack and cowboy." From there on, it's downhill all the way! Another way to come at this assignment is to look at the learned advice offered to lower-scale English teachers by their collegiate counterparts; in Education for College (1961), a distillation of thirteen volumes of official reports on the Portland, Oregon, high school curriculum, we find the same old niche for folklore, only this time it's called "Reservoir Literature" and it is plugged in as low as possible in the high school program with an arrow pointing down as a hint where it really might belong. The report declares, "Some of this literature can be planted early, needs little explication, and will survive through the very simplicity of its force." This is a wonderful generalization to try out on some of the high schoolers' own folklore which your students may easily collect themselves in the field.

Lest I be thought out-of-date, I conclude with a glance at the latest example of a folklore school aid to hit my desk. It is a paperback titled (never mind the competition) American Folklore and issued this year by Scribner's in something called their "American Character Series." The editor, who will be left mercilessly nameless here, confines himself to such gems of wisdom as "Today, oral folklore in America has little significance" and "The earliest American folklore belonged, of course, to the Indian." His selections of song and story, the bulk of the book, come from almost everyone but folk: Frost, Sandburg, Twain, Schoolcraft, Carl Carmer, Langston Hughes, Paul Gallico and so forth. The whole package is hedged thickly with copyright notices and inane study questions, strewn with arty block prints, and wrapped in glossy, gimmicky covers. You can take it from there on your own, and Scribner's will gladly send you an examination copy if you but ask.

Abruptly, the discussion must end here, for lack of space, leaving unsaid all that might be suggested about other courses, other levels, other special approaches. But the foundation for expanding the folklore offerings in English departments---I am convinced---lies in exploiting the interest that exists among students and colleagues, however wrong-headed it may be to start with. We must then show by clear example in classwork and publications what the genuinely exciting possibilities really are for folklore. Eventually then, if we begin missionizing in the introductory courses we will someday start to meet our converts coming back as seniors or graduates, and now requesting (demanding, sometimes) the bigger better courses we'd like to teach, or perhaps some direction for their theses. At that point we're off and running towards autonomy---or at least a joking relationship with the idea.